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# STUDY PROJECT

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505 PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT  
(A LEGACY OF LESSONS)

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL JACK P. NIX, JR.

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505 PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT (A LEGACY OF LESSONS)

An Individual Study Project  
Intended for Publication

by

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# ABSTRACT

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## INTRODUCTION

War experiences often lie fallow until the beginning of a new conflict; then, with the price of lives and national prestige we again learn the lessons of our forefathers. From World War II through the 1980's the U.S. Army has been blessed with veterans sharing hard learned lessons from combat. Today, the Army is quickly losing this experience which has acted so naturally as a training base. Now we must rely on history as a foundation of knowledge and with imagination extrapolate current capabilities into a realistic training program. As we forge the Army of the twenty-first century and strive to train as we will fight, historical precedent must remain an integral part of our thinking and training.

According to FM 25-1 the United States Army's mandate is to "have an Army ready for combat."<sup>1</sup> The difficult question every professional officer must continuously ask is: Are we ready for combat now? In today's world of fast communications and transportation the "now" can be a couple of days for some of our units. Furthermore, real-time mass media will shape public opinion so quickly that a second effort may not be allowed if we fail' to win the first battle. Specifically, our mandate is to win the initial battle. Are we ready enough? To answer that question this study takes an incisive look at the intensity of a nascent regiment's preparation for combat and its early combat experiences. From this analysis we may better answer our current readiness question and ameliorate deficient areas.

The U.S. Army's history is filled with lessons of war but perhaps no single Regimental history from World War II is more replete with examples than the 505 Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR). Its record of six campaigns, 325 days in combat, and four combat parachute operations in World War II remains unmatched.<sup>2</sup> To understand how this novice Regiment with no combat experience could survive the mishaps of the first test of night airborne warfare and still accomplish all missions requires a close examination of its formation, training, and early combat experiences.

This account is drawn from interviews with four distinguished veterans of the 505 PIR.<sup>3</sup> It does not portray a complete unit history but rather summarizes their personal reflections. All four veterans joined the Regiment in the States and participated in the unit's pre-deployment training. Together their World War II service comprises fifteen combat jumps and over 1140 days in combat from Sicily to Berlin.

#### THE FRYING PAN (An Appropriate Beginning)

Born in the "Frying Pan Area" of Fort Benning, Georgia, on 6 July 1942, the 505 PIR was committed to combat behind enemy lines one year later.<sup>4</sup> July's sizzling heat and humidity along the Chattahoochee River pale in comparison to the hardships faced by the paratroopers in combat but perhaps this was appropriate seasoning for the difficult days ahead. Other airborne regiments had formed prior to the 505 PIR but they had begun as platoons and expanded into larger units. This Regiment started with a cadre of officers and noncommissioned officers from the

Airborne Command and three other Regiments (502d, 503d, 504th).

A rapid fill of officers and men direct from Parachute School soon brought the Regiment to its authorized strength.

During this first year the cadre of the 505 PIR would be split several times as requirements were received to form other units. This tumultuous personnel situation would be reflected in the numerous leadership changes made while still in the States.

Undoubtedly the most influential paratrooper assigned to this fledgling Regiment was its first commander, Major James M. Gavin. Even today the veterans of the 505 PIR speak of him with quiet reverence. As a tactical officer at West Point in 1941 he had become infatuated with the possibilities of vertical envelopment by parachute and glider.<sup>5</sup> While vehemently studying parachute operations/techniques of the Russians and Germans the then Captain Gavin gained enthusiasm and volunteered for Parachute School. Following a brief time as company commander in the 503 PIR he was assigned as the Plans and Training Officer of the Provisional Parachute Group. In this position he developed much of the early training and techniques of the Army's "new" airborne forces.

If ever a leader arrived in his unit with a clear vision, it was the soon to be Colonel "Slim Jim" Gavin, the First Colonel of the Regiment.<sup>6</sup> His study, example and clairvoyance of the problems ahead were inspirational and instrumental in the molding of his revered fighting paratroopers. Colonel Gavin understood from the outset that success on airborne operations would rest foremost with the individual paratrooper. He cast aside the repetitive group drills of the past and replaced them with intense physical training, pride, and combat skills.



Initiative and imagination were encouraged from the newest private up. Without exception, every member of the Regiment participated in the strenuous physical training and field exercises. Malingerers and acts of indiscipline were simply not tolerated; after all, this was a volunteer unit. Some of the men had volunteered for parachute duty to escape previous assignments and others were coerced into joining but, once in the unit, the choice to remain was an individual one. Misfits were eliminated with daily runs and weekly twenty to thirty mile marches. A simple rule "if you fall out, you ship out" set the standard for all.<sup>7</sup>

Days often began by running for an hour or more to the training area with weapons and field equipment. Then, after a full day of training, the movement back was again conducted at the double-time. Little quarter was given men who failed to stay in formation and the few leaders that fell out were gone the next day. Frequent marches of twenty plus miles were followed immediately with tactical drills. Non-stop field exercises were intentionally designed to stress paratroopers and leaders to their limits.<sup>8</sup>

Physical and mental toughness established in early training was to remain an integral part of the 505 PIR macho self-image throughout the War. The rigor of parachute school had already established a commonality of high physical standards and from this base the arduous became even more demanding. Envisioning the physical demands that would soon be placed on these men as they fought for days behind enemy lines, Colonel Gavin was relentless in his pursuit of every man's prowess. He was frequently found in the lead on these grueling activities. A weak,

incapable soldier in combat would require two other men to care for him. This clearly was not acceptable and leaders were ruthless in eliminating the unfit.

Competition among units was encouraged and dutifully rewarded. Every effort was made to build pride with unit insignia, the Regimental newspaper, and mascots. During these early days several recruiting films were being made which helped embody the paratrooper's pride in himself and his unit. Americans were learning about parachute units and the men enjoyed the touting. And if that was not enough, their unique uniforms and extra pay were most assuredly a capitalistic indicator that paratroopers were special.

As this fighting team developed it began to reflect the character of Colonel Gavin. His leadership style is best described by an anecdote told by Brigadier General (Retired) Winton and it seems to have been the experience of all young officers reporting to the Regiment.<sup>9</sup> The then Lieutenant Winton knocked on Colonel Gavin's door to report for duty in the Regiment. Receiving permission to enter the Colonel's office, 1LT Winton presented himself. Before returning the salute and without looking up Colonel Gavin said in an emphatic voice, "Lieutenant, in this outfit you'll jump first and eat last." This attitude of sharing danger and hardships permeated the officers and men of the 505 PIR. After the war Colonel Gavin wrote:<sup>10</sup>

The one thing that the 505 would always remember, and often in retrospect talked about, were the Parachute Lieutenants. Their combat performance before Normandy was extraordinary, but in Normandy it was brilliant. Time and again, Lieutenants took over and provided leadership where it was critically needed. Unfortunately, their losses were heavy, but the lessons that they taught us and the inspiration that they gave us would go with us into whatever came next.

Noncommissioned officers were an early shortage in the Regiment and would remain so through most of the war. Parachute School produced few NCO graduates because it had few volunteers and the very best ones were soon commissioned. Some effort was made within the old Airborne Division to hold top NCOs back from Officer Candidate School with a promise of battlefield commissioning.<sup>11</sup> This NCO shortage meant much of the training and administration fell upon the junior officers as would the leadership in combat. It was common to find officers marching their units to training and instructing them in combat skills. Soldiers simply were not asked to do anything their officers could not do as well. When a new requirement developed the officers taught themselves and then their men. Lieutenants were expected to be the best in their platoons.

In October 1942 the Regiment moved to the Alabama side of Fort Benning but the facilities were still woefully inadequate. Tar paper buildings, open messhalls, and few shower facilities remained the plight of the 505ers. The men were beginning to expect little comfort and anticipate the rigorous training. Individual marksmanship was emphasized along with crew drills for the heavy weapons. Hasty ranges were established using washed out gullies in the Alabama clay for marksmanship training.<sup>1</sup> Particular emphasis was placed on quick reaction courses that required the paratroopers' accurate engagement at close range targets.<sup>12</sup> Platoon level training was given the highest priority with a tactical exercise following each jump. By now it had become obvious that tight drop patterns were going to be difficult to achieve.

Colonel Gavin recognized this likelihood of dispersion and instinctively knew only platoons imbued with tenacity, skill, and spirit to fight against all odds would have a chance to accomplish the Regiment's missions behind enemy lines. The Regiment's training was clearly emphasizing tasks that would develop platoons accordingly.

With this strenuous training and constant requirement for teamwork the men began to develop an inseparable bond. Out of this bonding, arduous training and the airborne perks (pay, jump boots, etc.) came a degree of vanity. When asked what made these men so tenacious in the forthcoming battles one of the veterans answered "vanity."<sup>13</sup> Even when outnumbered and outgunned the paratroopers would not admit or succumb to defeat. Vanity has an ugly connotation in our society but in this context seems to have been a useful attribute. The paratroopers were told they were worth five other soldiers and came to believe it.

As pride grew so did tales of reckless partying and fighting with "leg" units. Some of these stories are as much a part of the Regiment's mysticism as its rigorous training. The veterans still recall with glee nights in Columbus, Georgia, and places like Cotton's Fish Camp (a roadside bar/grill). These riotous incidents were often a problem for Colonel Gavin as he attempted to mediate with Post authorities and local town people. Through it all Colonel Gavin managed to keep an even perspective about off-duty activities and the men continued to get their passes.<sup>14</sup> He did on several occasions extract a "pound of flesh" for the paratrooper's overly exuberant behavior. But these physical tracks through the swamps had little lasting effect on off-duty behavior. Clearly, Colonel Gavin

understood that the aggressive, spirited, and cocky paratrooper could not be expected to discard these traits as he exited the gates of Fort Benning on pass.

The wisdom of this tolerance was to be seen a few months later when the Regiment joined the 82d Airborne Division. Someone at Division decided for security measures all personnel should be restricted to unit areas. Hundreds of AWOLs immediately followed as paratroopers made one last dash to see family and girlfriends. This ill-conceived policy was soon revoked and these AWOL paratroopers returned to gallantly fight the forthcoming campaigns.<sup>15</sup> The importance for leaders to understand mores and maintain their delicate balance was once again illustrated.

In February 1943 the 505 PIR was on the move to Fort Bragg, N.C., and assignment under the 82d Airborne Division. Life was to improve with semi-permanent barracks and better Post facilities but that was the only relief. Now the training centered around learning to fight as battalions and as part of the Division. History was made on 30 March 1943 when the 505 PIR conducted the U.S. Army's first regimental mass jump near Camden, South Carolina. General Marshall, Sir Winston Churchill, and other distinguished visitors were observing the training that day.<sup>16</sup> Not only was the 505th under scrutiny but the future of American airborne forces was being decided there and with the forthcoming Sicily operation. Many senior leaders still doubted the utility of airborne forces and questioned the sizeable investment. Their development was being watched with a jaundiced eye on large airborne unit capabilities.

From the beginning problems with interoperability and procedures arose with the Army Air Corps. Usually these had been resolved between unit leaders and air crews but as the size of aircraft formations grew and the number of jumpers increased into the thousands, it became apparent that standard operating procedures (SOPs) were an imperative. Aircraft loading and fuel planning required strict adherence to weight limitations. Once on the ground the paratrooper must function with only those items that arrived with him. Resupply would always be doubtful. Therefore, planning and standardization of loads had to be precise and the value of every pound maximized. The 505 PIR led the way in this standardization process which began at Fort Bragg, improved in Africa, and was ratified or modified with the Sicily campaign. Their load planning for combat was adopted by other airborne regiments.

Reacting to frequent mission changes with short verbal orders was instituted as a part of training exercises. Initial missions would be planned in great detail but even when everything went as planned changes would be inserted to develop flexibility. As described by LTG (Retired) Norton, then a company commander, the intent was very similar to a quarterback calling an audible at the line of scrimmage.<sup>17</sup> Since even the best planned airborne operation begins in a state of confusion, this reaction training proved invaluable. Success depended heavily on every leader's understanding of all the missions and his determination to accomplish them with available personnel and equipment.

### AFRICA (Last Stop for Training)

Colonel Gavin had wedded this "venturesome, uninhibited lot" together with the toughest training he could devise and in April 1943 they were sailing for Casablanca and more hardships.<sup>18</sup> Security during stateside movement had been tight and the paratroopers were ordered to strike all Division insignia from their uniform and store their jump boots in duffle bags. Obviously, if this lightly armed force was to have any chance of success, surprise would be paramount. Issue #6 of the Static Line (Regimental paper) was passed around after sailing. This ended trooper speculation by announcing their destination was North Africa. Enroute the Chaplains were kept busy with young paratroopers who remembered they had left problems back home.

Stateside problems were soon forgotten with disembarkation and the misery of French Morocco. The paratroopers quickly dubbed their area outside Oujda as "the Dust Bowl." Facilities were non-existent and shelter-halves were the only cover from sun and wind. Flies were so bad that the troopers had to wave them away with one hand while eating with the other. Naturally dysentery spread with hardly anyone escaping its affliction. Water was in short supply and the chlorination was so high it burned their throats. Daytime temperatures daily soared over 110 degrees but training continued at an accelerated pace.

Training was conducted mostly at night. This may have been more of an acknowledgment that German fighter aircraft would force the Regiment into night drops than it was a concession to the heat. Whichever, the veterans all agree their stay in North Africa was their most miserable time of the war.

Experiments were conducted to determine the best loading plans and flying formations for dropping the Regiment at night. The proving ground was to be combat and only a few weeks remained for preparation. North Africa was the crucible for developing equipment and many of the techniques used throughout the war by all the airborne forces. Although the Russians in the 1930's had conducted demonstrations landing large assault forces and the Germans had capitalized on the concept, there was little information available to the 505 PIR on how to conduct large, night airborne operations.<sup>19</sup> It simply had not been done.

During these experiments the rocky terrain and frequent winds caused a disproportionate number of injuries and limited parachuting. So the Regiment adjusted training to one or two jumpers per plane with the preponderance of the unit scattered and waiting on the ground. In this way tests on flying formations, accuracy of the drop, and ground tactical formations could be rehearsed and evaluated without a large number of injuries. Forecasting training injuries, the Division had deployed a battalion of trained replacements to Africa. Injured men were quickly replaced by paratroopers already inculcated with Division standards. This flow of replacements from a forward airborne training base continued throughout the war and made assimilation of new personnel easier after each campaign.

One benefit from the rugged terrain jumping was the mental toughness that developed from being bruised and broken by the rocks. Paratroopers came to realize that regardless of the pain following a landing, the mission must be continued. Furthermore, they set aside the training



concept that the drop zone must be a cleared field. High winds and rough terrain in Sicily were to give almost everyone aches and pains for days following the jump but the Germans offered no empathy. Every man was needed in that fight for survival and this would be the case in all the behind lines insertions.

Ingenuity was encouraged and good ideas incorporated into SOPs. In their zeal to overcome problems the experiments sometimes reached the extreme. For example, the lack of ground transportation restricted movement of heavy equipment once in the combat area and numerous concepts for carts, wagons, etc. were devised to minimize this deficiency. One experiment was run using a donkey for carrying equipment. The animal, equipped with a parachute harness, did not understand he was to land with his knees bent and the creature broke two legs. Needless to say, this idea was not incorporated into the SOPs but it does illustrate how much effort was being exerted to fully develop and refine this untried type of warfare.

The intensity of live fire exercises reached an unprecedented height in Africa with night attacks involving movement through obstacles of wires and mines. Many veterans remember these rigorous drills as their most valuable pre-combat confidence builder. Colonel Gavin was not satisfied with the typical overhead machine gun rounds simulating enemy fire. To add realism, he placed soldiers in towers looking down and across the attacking troops. From there they would shoot into the ground amongst the attacking men.<sup>20</sup> For the leaders and troopers this difficult training proved to be a real ice-breaker for

those first few days of combat. But nothing would imbue confidence and unity in the 505ers like the first battle victory.

While still training in North Africa, intelligence channels brought word the Germans were booby-trapping equipment and facilities left behind with Teller mines. Since the Regiment had not been trained to disarm these mines, a hasty program of instruction was developed and with characteristic leadership by example, the officers went first through the "sweaty palms" drill of disarming live Teller mines. At least one officer lost a hand in the training but the entire Regiment was soon very proficient at performing the task.

#### SICILY (Airborne Crucible)

The Camden, S.C. Regimental drop had been an evaluation of airborne capabilities by the high command but Sicily was clearly the final test by fire. The results would soon shape Allied thinking about the use of airborne forces and Nazi actions on the continent of Europe.<sup>21</sup> Since a shortage of aircraft allowed insertion of only one regiment, General Ridgway selected the 505 PIR to be the lead regiment and attached a battalion of the 504 PIR to Colonel Gavin. In his autobiography the General states he chose the 505 PIR and Colonel Gavin did a "prodigious job" preparing for the operation.<sup>22</sup> He does not specifically state why the 505 PIR was chosen but obviously the Regiment and its commander gave General Ridgway the most confidence. Thus, the "newest" regiment was selected over one that had been formed earlier.

On 1 July 1943 the Regiment moved to French Tunisia within striking range of Sicily (Operation Husky) and training ceased as earnest planning and preparations began. Living conditions improved immensely and the paratroopers were able to rest during non-duty periods in the more palatable weather.

Colonel Gavin and several key officers made a night trip in fighters across the Mediterranean Sea to check the route and coast line of Sicily. This was done one month in advance of the drop in order to have similar moonlight. Aerial photographs of the target areas were issued and detailed sandtables constructed to reinforce every trooper's knowledge of his duties and unit plans. Terrain with similar characteristics was used to conduct rehearsals of the plan through battalion level.

By process of elimination the paratroopers guessed Sicily or Sardinia would be their destination; however, only a few key leaders were aware of the target location and date. This technique of giving sanitized photography and maps to the lowest level early for planning while withholding specific times and locations for security reasons was essential to airborne operations. Success was dependent on every man's detailed knowledge of the plan and security of that plan. The only way to accomplish both was through early dissemination of essential trooper information and retention of time and country. When possible, future operations would be planned and secured in the same manner.

Despite the pell-mell of preparations, the Regiment celebrated its birthday on 6 July with a party of barbecue and beer. At this gathering Colonel Gavin spoke to the men about their hard training and his

confidence in their ability to handle the Germans. He also reminded them of the importance of their forthcoming mission and that their actions would be representing all American paratroopers. It must have been a stimulating talk for Division history records after his talk:23

. . .there wasn't a 505er who wouldn't follow him through Hell if he so ordered it and they would have the Colors flying over Satan's C.P. hours ahead of schedule.

Frequent talks by the Commander had been an early tradition of Colonel Gavin. In addition to keeping the men informed and emphasizing the importance of their training, he often reminded the troopers they would be getting the most difficult missions - "the ones no one else would want or could accomplish."24 It was against this forthright backdrop that an unswerving mindset manifested. The paratroopers grew to understand their missions would be hazardous, yet essential to each campaign's success. This acceptance along with "vanity" was to be an essential catalyst in their desperate fights with the Germans. They believed in themselves and each other and were willing to give totally of themselves. Platoons and companies would continue to fight even when casualties rose above fifty percent.

The men were awake early on 9 July to begin a day of final inspections and loading. These pre-combat inspections were routine and accepted by the paratroopers as a necessary step toward insuring the "team" had all required equipment. Late in the afternoon as they sat under designated aircraft wings the password was issued along with a written message from the Regimental Commander giving them their destination - Sicily. This last minute reminder from the Commander

focused the paratroopers on the high ideals of freedom their mission supported. It beseeched them to avoid firing on each other and conserve ammunition and water. Finally, the last two sentences summarized the Commander's intent for each trooper. "Attack violently. Destroy him (enemy) wherever found."<sup>25</sup> These departing words reinforced his mindset and training. Regardless of where he might land, every paratrooper could be part of the overall disruption plan by cutting lines of communications (LOCs) and killing the enemy. History has recorded the accuracy of this vision and the effectiveness of rear area disruption.

Missions for the 505 PIR all centered around seizing key terrain and blocking German/Italian counterattacking forces while Patton's Army came ashore. As would be the case in future operations (Normandy being an exception), relatively few paratroopers accomplished all the Regiment's missions. Over the Mediterranean Sea the 226 C-47s carrying the Regimental Combat Team encountered a windstorm that dispersed the formation, misoriented pilots, and delayed the drop time. Unknown to Colonel Gavin as he landed on Sicily, his forces were spread over sixty miles.

All but three aircraft complied with the order that every man would jump regardless of location and those three simply could not find land upon which to jump. Dispersal of the Regiment added to the enemy's confusion, disrupted his LOCs over a large area of coast line, and caused him to exaggerate estimates of the number of paratroopers. American ingenuity was soon at work as small groups of 505ers assembled and attempted to ascertain their locations. Many of the pilots and jumpmasters had become so confused over the Mediterranean Sea they

were not sure if the ground on which they jumped was Sicily. Despite this uncertainty, they set about ambushing enemy couriers, cutting phone lines, and commandeering transportation to support their movement to objectives.

Even the Commander did not escape this confusion. Gathering about twenty men from various plane loads, Colonel Gavin began to move in the direction he thought was correct for Gela. He remained unsure of his location until a prisoner was interrogated.<sup>26</sup> Like other leaders, Colonel Gavin led his group toward the flash and sound of pre-invasion naval fires. As the small groups of paratroopers moved, they gathered strength, followed their last order, and attempted to reach their objectives. By daylight most of the small bands were forced to hide to avoid contact with larger enemy units. But with darkness they were on the move again toward Gela and their largest battle on Sicily - Biazza Ridge.

Intelligence had been correct about the Gela area being the critical choke point for a German counterattack of the invasion force. However, they had failed to predict the presence of Tiger tanks from the Herman Goering Panzer Division.<sup>27</sup> A large number (200) of 3d Battalion paratroopers had assembled with their Battalion Commander near Gela and Colonel Gavin was able to use them along with other miscellaneous small groups to halt the initial attacks on Patton's beachhead. The bazooka proved ineffective against the heavier Tiger tank and the paratroopers desperately improvised with captured German Eighty-eights and panzerfausts. Naval gunfire was invaluable in halting the Germans'

attacks and a number of incidents using trickery were successful for the paratroopers. One lieutenant convinced an overwhelming number of Italian soldiers to surrender by sending a prisoner to tell them he was preparing to shift naval gunfire onto their position. In actuality the shells were landing some distance away but the lieutenant did not have any communications with the ships. Many such incidents took place as these small groups of paratroopers remembered to "Attack violently, destroy him wherever found."

Link-up with the landing forces began to occur piecemeal on D+1 and would continue for several days. Often the 505 PIR men would join units coming ashore and continue to fight until they were able to find a major unit of their Regiment. These link-ups were without mishap despite the disjointed manner in which they occurred. Knowing most of the soldiers coming ashore had never seen a paratrooper in battle dress, the Regiment had sent a group of men in jump suits to be observed by soldiers in the landing force prior to D-Day. This, in addition to white armbands and other distinctive recognition signals, was very important. With link-up the Regiment was able to draw supplies, evacuate wounded, and most importantly, obtain supporting fires.<sup>28</sup>

There was another benefit that was not tangible but seems to have been present in Sicily and other pre-invasion operations. The paratroopers set a fine fighting example for the unblooded units linking up with them. In one incident the soldiers of the 2d Battalion 16th Infantry ran away at the sight of German tanks. Paratroopers from 505 PIR quickly established blocking positions and halted the enemy tanks' movement

toward the beachhead. Similar incidents would follow in Italy and Normandy as the presence and actions of paratroopers would help steady new troops.

It would be incorrect to describe the paratroopers as fearless. They were human and anxiety was always present before jumps (particularly combat) and battle. But they did seem to gain control of their doubts quicker than soldiers in most other units. Of course a part of this confidence came with training and competence. But perhaps General Fais captured the essence of the difference when he said:29

It's a great feeling after completing a jump.  
There is a tremendous release from within.  
You've faced fear and you've overcome it.

The exuberance of confidence from having survived the combat jump itself seems to carry with it an audacity equalled only by a successful combat mission.

After forty-one days of combat the Regiment was withdrawn to French Tunisia to refit and await its next call to battle. Sicily had not gone as planned but the 505th missions were accomplished and the value of large airborne operations validated. General Patton acknowledged the actions of paratroopers speeded up the landings by two days but the greatest tribute was paid by the enemy. General Karl Student, commander of the German airborne operations in Crete and Chief of Staff of all German paratroopers, said:30

. . .if it had not been for the Allied airborne forces blocking the Hermann Goering Armored Division from reaching the beachhead, that division would have driven the initial seaborne forces back into the sea.



General Gavin referred to the Sicily operation as a "Safe" or "Self-Adjusting Foul Up." He hastened to add:

The pay-off then is in the individual troopers and the small unit commanders. If they have learned their missions and those of other units working with them and if they have the initiative and moral and physical courage to do something about it, everything will turn out all right.

#### ITALY (A Call for Help)

The Regiment's return to Kairouan in French Tunisia was short and on 5 September 1943 it was moved along with supporting transport aircraft to airfields on Sicily. Leaders were quick to refit and assimilate replacements because a new mission could come without warning. Unlike other units pulled off-line for rest, the airborne units could be back in combat within a few hours. Staffs feverishly planned operations as the Division received no less than six different missions for Italy. After Sicily General Ridgway was fully cognizant of his Division's limitations and actively sought to turn some of these missions around. As he would later write, 32

. . .it was human nature for senior commanders to want to appear completely modern and imaginative and bold in their thinking, so the first thing they thought of, when pondering how to overcome a strongpoint, was to drop airborne troops on top of it.

Ironically, the airborne units' worth no longer had to be sold; instead, they needed protection against misuse.

On 13 September 1943 LTG Mark W. Clark sent a message to General Ridgway expressing concern over the progress his 5th Army was making

in getting ashore in Italy and asked for immediate assistance.<sup>35</sup> Within twelve hours the 504 PIR was enroute for a drop near Liestum, Italy and the 505 PIR followed the next night using the same aircraft and drop zone. The American Army had discovered a new theater reserve - the paratrooper.

After all the detail planning for Sicily, the operation into Italy was conducted with no rehearsals and few briefings. Other than establishing assembly areas for the units and telling them to stand-by for further instructions, there was little preparation. Also unlike Sicily, these Regiments were not jumping into heavily contested areas. Instead, they were being inserted by air in order to expedite getting combat power ashore. Once on the ground they were moved by truck and foot to forward battle areas and fought as light infantry. Pathfinders were used for the first time in Italy to mark drop zones. Their assistance and the benign drop zone environment allowed the 505 PIR to be assembled one hour after the drop.

Sicily experiences had built the esprit and confidence of the paratroopers to a pinnacle and they were sure they could handle the Germans. The splendid leadership of their young officers had met the test in Sicily and it continued in Italy. Lieutenant Tallerday, XO of Company C, found one of his men missing a life preserver just prior to taking off for Italy. Unflinchingly, he gave the man his life preserver for the flight over the Tyrrhenian Sea. As fate would have it, his plane was hit and caught fire over water. With great trepidation the Lieutenant led his men out of the burning plane and into the dark knowing that with his eighty plus pounds of equipment

he would surely drown. Fortunately, they landed on the beach a few feet from water's edge and survived. Years later when asked why he had so readily given this soldier his life preserver Colonel (Retired) Tallerday simply said, "I was a leader and responsible for taking care of my men."<sup>34</sup>

The annals of the Regiment are filled with accounts of leaders placing themselves in harm's way leading patrols or attacks. It was quite normal to find field grade officers personally involved with platoon and company actions. Perhaps General Ridgway provided the best insight when he said,<sup>35</sup> "All lives are equal on the battlefield, and a dead rifleman is as great a loss, in the sight of God, as a dead general." The 505 PIR leaders personified this belief and in so doing bonded an unbeatable fighting unit.

The missions of the Regiment in Italy were considerably different than those in Sicily. Now they were being used to hold the shoulders of attacking units and for security of critical facilities. Several plans to throw the Division against strongly fortified positions along the Volturno River were defeated by General Ridgway.<sup>36</sup> He realized that daring and enthusiasm are great assets in the enemy's rear area but they do not negate the need for heavy artillery in a deliberate attack against fortified positions.

Deployment of the 82d Airborne Division in support of 5th Army's invasion had made a difference in two ways. First, it contributed to the rapid build-up of combat power at a critical time. And secondly, the splendid examples set by the paratroopers (particularly the 504 PIR)

were instrumental in getting other units moving against the Germans. General Clark was so impressed he tried to keep the 82d Airborne Division with 5th Army in Italy. The decision was finally escalated to General Eisenhower who disapproved the Division staying but did direct one regiment would be left with General Clark. The 504 PIR continued fighting with the 5th Army when the remainder of the Division deployed to England in November 1943. They fought until April 1944 and arrived in England too atrophic for the Normandy invasion. Thus, the 505 PIR was the only airborne regiment in the Normandy operation with combat experience.

#### NORMANDY (The Gate to Berlin)

The Regiment had four more campaigns between it and Berlin and each would be a little different. Notwithstanding these differences, all would be fought with the same tenacity and spirit that had become their hallmark. Colonel Gavin would be promoted and moved to Division prior to entering Europe. Colonel William Ekman assumed command prior to Normandy and would fight the 505 PIR until war's end.

Even though they had not lost a battle in Sicily or Italy, the Regiment had learned some hard lessons. Many of these were passed to other airborne regiments as the preparations for Normandy began in earnest. Pathfinders, assembly techniques, packing lists, and aircraft loads were but a few of the things ameliorated. But their combat experience could not be totally transferred and the marked difference

in units at Normandy were apparent. In the words of Colonel Ben H. Vandervoort, Commander of the 2d Battalion:37

The esprit-de-corps of the Regiment grew with combat experience. Their motivation was "mutual faith." Every soldier knew every other man would do his job in combat or die trying. They would not let each other down. Within the mutual faith all competed to make the play to win the game - like a Super Bowl team. That faith and competitive spirit welded the Regiment into a rough tough winning combat team.

Normandy was a mission similar to Sicily for the 505ers. They were dropped five hours ahead of the amphibious landings to seize critical nodes and block counterattacking Germans. The seizure of St. Mere Eglise with its strategic highway and causeways over the Merderet River was easy compared to the thirty hours they had to defend it prior to link-up with American forces. Reinforced with self-propelled guns and mobile artillery, the German attacking column was five times the strength of the Regiment. But the pale faced, scared GIs coming ashore seemed more relieved to see the paratroopers than vice versa.38

The Merderet River had provided another valuable lesson that would be exploited in Holland. Seizure of crossing sites over the Merderet River from one side proved costly. Drop zones in Holland were planned in order to facilitate seizure of bridges from both sides. Forcing a defender to fight in two directions not only was a tremendous tactical advantage but it also was psychologically devastating. Holland was the largest air drop ever conducted with over 5000 aircraft and 2500 gliders moving an Airborne Army. It represented the culmination of World War II airborne doctrine, tactics, and techniques, and was the 505 PIR's only

daylight jump. For the first time alternate drop zones were used by the Regiment in its daylight scurry to get on objectives.

Remembering they were only a few hours from combat, the training between campaigns remained rigorous and continuous. Live fire exercises, physical conditioning, and equipment maintenance left little time for celebrating victories.<sup>39</sup> Troopers slept with their rifles and combat load even in garrison. Like Italy, the Battle of the Bulge would be a quick, unexpected call for the 505 PIR. Traveling by truck for 100 miles, the Regiment was placed in front of the 1st SS Panzer Division, Hitler's best remaining unit. The Regiment again held its ground in repeated engagements that often left dead Nazis in the foxholes with paratroopers.

Central Europe was the 505 PIR's epilogue for World War II. It was fifty-nine days of combat that culminated by crossing the Elbe River and linking up with Russian soldiers. Compared with the other desperate fights for survival, it was low key. The campaign represented an end to the war in Europe and it was appropo the 505 PIR be a part of the victory.

#### REFLECTIVE COMPARISONS (Cogent Lessons)

Are we ready for combat now? Every commander must continuously assess his answer to this question. My comparison of today's Army units with the 505 PIR of 1943 leads to an emphatic "no" answer. We have certainly progressed a long way in the 1980's from the pampered, indisciplined soldiers of the 1970's. But this is little solace if we

still cannot answer our readiness question in the affirmative. Having discussed in detail the training and early fighting of our successful veterans, it is now prudent to compare their experiences with current unit status.

The lessons of the 505ers appear to be easily assimilated and are apparent in most combat units' current training. Live fire exercises, pre-mission inspections, rehearsals, and physical training are but a few of the similarities. However, when we look deeper at intensity, standards, and realism, a significant shortfall in our assimilation is obvious. Combat is non-stop but we seldom design our training exercises to be that way. Safety regulations and nervous leaders often degrade live fire exercises into on-line, march and shoot drills. Frequently we do not allow time and resources for full dress rehearsals. Physical fitness time is scheduled but volleyball is more fun than an eight mile foot movement to the marksmanship range.

Capturing the high, uncompromising 505 PIR standards is the difficult challenge of our peacetime commanders. If we are to be "ready NOW for combat,"<sup>40</sup> units must do more than mimic the training events of our historical winners. They must embody the same intensity and robustness that were the soul of 505 PIR. Three areas for amelioration are appropriate for our combat units and necessary to break through our current mediocre peacetime barrier to readiness.

First, we must recognize rigorous training has to be led by a competent chain of command. American mores will allow nothing less. Soldiers will push themselves to their limits in training when routinely

led by officers and noncommissioned officers who give one hundred percent of themselves. The chain of command is only as strong as its weakest member. It then follows we must assiduously identify weak leaders and ruthlessly eliminate them from leadership positions.

Secondly, complete and rigorous individual training is an imperative for a soldier to survive and fight on today's highly lethal battlefield; just as it was for the World War II men of 505 PIR. Numerous excuses have been made by peacetime commanders for not training soldiers to physical and mental limits. It hurts reenlistment, morale will be low, and the "old sergeants" cannot perform are but a few reasons we give ourselves for falling short. None of these is an excuse for degrading combat readiness.

It is axiomatic you cannot have tough soldiers without tough training. The young men now coming into the Army readily adapt to more strenuous training requirements. While the Army recruited with slogans like "The Army wants to join you," the Marines stayed with "We build men" and "We're looking for a few good men." They were more successful. Even the Army's airborne units were never short volunteers during the recruiting crisis of the seventies. Parachute training offered the soldiers an instant chance to call home and announce he was doing "manly" things. There are plenty of strong young males looking for a challenge who can fill our combat units. When we fail to challenge them we fail to meet their expectations and our readiness mission.

Finally, unit cohesion is best built through shared hardships and the completion of difficult tasks as a team. Any seasoned commander has



experienced this bonding of a unit following a difficult training event. The soldiers of 505 PIR were confident in themselves and their fellow paratroopers long before the Sicily campaign. Demanding training and a Spartan life developed their confidence and gave them a critical edge in their "first battle." That same edge may be the difference between success and failure in our "next battle."

This comparison is not intended to be pejorative but rather a partial condemnation of our current training and leadership. The preponderance of leaders struggle daily to maintain combat readiness. However, we do lose sight of the elusive but real combat ready standard. Erosion of these more intense and demanding standards is a natural phenomenon which occurs as soldiers and leaders gravitate to the course of least resistance. Every commander's challenge and responsibility is to vigorously oppose this diminution. Active duty units are but a few days from combat and must possess the mental and physical toughness to overcome the initial shock of combat. Their imperative is to function under fire without hesitation in the "first battle." Historical examples, such as 505 PIR, can assist leaders of our peacetime Army in maintaining a realistic perspective of the "face of battle" and combat's plethora of stressful challenges. By recognizing this requirement to constantly re-establish our training intensity, rigor, and realism, we will be well on the way to solving this problem. Although some of the lessons of our veterans' legacy are imperceptible, we must not fail to incorporate them in today's training environment.

# ENDNOTES

1. U.S. Department of the Army, Field Manual 25-1, Training, Washington, 28 February 1985, p. 3.

2. Allen L. Langdon, Ready, Indianapolis, Western Newspaper Publishing Company, 1986, p. 142.

3. LTG John Norton, BG Walter F. Winton, COL Benjamin H. Vandervoort, and COL Jack Tallerday made the writing of this paper possible. Their time and candidness in over fourteen hours of interviews provided the foundation for not only the facts presented but also the reflective thoughts. The tapes of their interviews are on file with the U.S. Army Military History Institute.

4. The "Frying Pan Area" at Fort Benning was a nickname given to a particular part of the Post by soldiers stationed there. "Frying Pan" reflects their enduring experience with the summer heat.

5. James M. Gavin, On To Berlin, New York, The Viking Press, 1978, p. 2.

6. Following the British system, Colonel Gavin was designated the First Colonel of the Regiment. The nickname, "Slim Jim," evolved from his slim built and first name. The veterans still use it with great affection.

7. Langdon, p. 1.

8. Interview with Lieutenant General John Norton, 20 February 1989.

9. Interview with Brigadier General Walter F. Winton, 20 December 1988.

10. Langdon, p. XIV, Forward by Lieutenant General James M. Gavin.

11. Interview with Lieutenant General John Norton, 20 February 1989.

12. Interview with Colonel Benjamin H. Vandervoort, 12 November 1988.

13. Ibid.

14. Gavin, p. 4.

15. Interview with Lieutenant General John Norton, 20 February 1989.

16. Gavin, p. 6.

17. Interview with Lieutenant General John Norton, 20 February 1989.

18. Langdon, p. XIII, Forward by Lieutenant General James M. Gavin. Words in quotation marks are General Gavin's description of his volunteers.

19. Gerard M. Devlin, Paratrooper!, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1979, p. 31.
20. Interview with Lieutenant General John Norton, 20 February 1989.
21. After Sicily the Germans realized the potential of large Allied airborne operations and worked feverishly to negate opportunities for their use in Normandy. So many obstacles were built in Normandy the drop zone had to change several times during the weeks prior to D-Day.
22. Matthew B. Ridgway, Soldier, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1956, p. 68.
23. Langdon, p. 17.
24. Interview with Lieutenant General John Norton, 20 February 1989.
25. Langdon, p. 17.
26. Gavin, p. 26.
27. Clay Blair, Ridgway's Paratroopers, New York, The Dial Press, 1985, p. 92.
28. Interview with Lieutenant General John Norton, 20 February 1989. General Norton emphasized the two most important things for an airborne force are intelligence and indirect fire.
29. Interview with General Melvin Zais, 1977, by Colonel William L. Golden and Colonel Richard C. Rice, Vol. II, p. 51, U.S. Army Military History Institute.
30. James M. Gavin, Airborne Warfare, Washington, Infantry Journal Press, 1947, p. 16.
31. Ibid., p. 17.
32. Ridgway, p. 93.
33. Ibid., p. 84.
34. Interview with Colonel Jack Tallerday, 11 November 1988.
35. Ridgway, p. 98.
36. Ibid., p. 94.
37. Benjamin H. Vandervoort, "Drop Zone Europe," undated paper. Colonel Vandervoort was 2d Battalion commander from October 1943 until he was severely wounded in the Ardennes. He emphasized that the unit ran on self-discipline rather than discipline applied from above.

38. Interview with Colonel Benjamin H. Vandervoort, 12 November 1988. He recalled how happy and surprised the GIs coming across the beach were to see his tattered paratroopers. The link-up seemed to give the GIs confidence to press the attack.

39. S3 Journal, 2d Battalion 505 PIR, 30 March 1945 through 25 April 1945, on file in U.S. Army Military History Institute.

40. FM 25-1 sets forth the Army's mandate to be ready for combat. The Korean War was our first experience with a "come as you are war" and proved to be a despicable showing. Since then we have paid more attention to the slippery issue of readiness. Our best yard stick for measuring and holding the line on readiness requirements is history.